

EXERCISING LEADERSHIP

It's all about relationships



Structurally, legislatures are unique institutions. Unlike most corporations and businesses, they're basically flat. The members are accountable only to the voters. No House speaker or Senate president can fire a legislator.

To get any business done, legislatures had to create some modest hierarchy—speakers and Senate presidents, majority and minority leaders, and committee chairs. The formal authority that goes along with those positions differs from state to state, from czar-like to facilitator. Even in states where power is very centralized, the essentially flat structure, plus the external accountability, creates opportunities for lawmakers to exercise leadership daily. Recognizing those opportunities and then skillfully taking advantage of them may take some practice.

Be an Expert

Leadership from members with little or no formal authority typically comes in two forms. There are the young, new backbenchers whose dogged persistence and passion for an issue enable them to steer a bill to enactment. Then there are the thoughtful, seasoned veterans who, by dint of some combination of their experience, personality, credibility and expertise, are able to influence legislation disproportionately to their formal authority.

When I was in the Massachusetts House, I knew two such people. One was Connie Kiernan, a Democrat who lost a contest for speaker. He transformed himself from just another ambitious wannabe into a diligent, hard-working lawmaker, a policy wonk, who made any legislation affecting the administration of justice his specialty. His judgment was respected by House members across party and ideological lines on a wide range of issues. I remember him sitting in the back of the chamber, almost always with a crowd of colleagues asking advice, getting his interpretations of legislative language, and, in general, learning from the master.

The other was Mary B. Newman, who in 1968 was the last

Republican elected from Cambridge. She made herself the resident expert on the House rules and therefore indispensable to all members when the speaker would try to use the rules to thwart or advance some legislation over the objection of whoever was at the microphone at the moment.

She was an equal opportunity expert, and in return, grateful members of all persuasions were sympathetic to legislation that was important to her. I recall standing at the microphone in the well of the chamber on more than one occasion, turning to look for Newman as the speaker was yelling out some rule to thwart whatever it was I was trying to do. Mary would yell out some instruction, "Move to suspend Rule 23!" and I would dutifully follow her guidance, not knowing what the speaker had done or what I was doing to counter his move.

Herding Cats

Legislators like Kiernan and Newman are probably few and far between in these days of heightened partisan rancor. And they probably no longer exist at all in the 15 states that have imposed term limits on legislative service. But they do exist.

Take Pam Althoff, a Republican senator in Illinois. Even my Democratic friends in Illinois say she fits the profile. Althoff is modest about her success, and perhaps in an institution full of egos, her modesty is part of the secret sauce. She is very clear, however, about how she exercises leadership without any authority.

"I am a herder of cats," she says. She concentrates on building relationships, personal first, followed by the professional. "And that takes work and time."

What kind of work?

"For example, I was appointed in the middle of the term. No one reached out to me, personally. I now do that regardless of party."

When new members come in, Althoff will introduce herself, take them to a committee meeting, tell them who they should get to know, or include them in a group dinner or drink.

"I'll ask them questions: 'Do you have a first bill? An issue you care deeply about? Do you need other sponsors?' You open yourself up to that exchange of information and then and only then can you challenge someone's thought process."

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Empathy is critical here. “Only respond after you have heard them out,” Althoff says. “Then you have created a safe haven in which to exchange ideas. You’re not threatening, criticizing or trying to intimidate.”

Althoff says no relationship can make someone do something they would not do otherwise. But it “can make them consider it. And you cannot expect them to always come along.” And when they don’t, the relationship is unaffected.

Althoff cites a bill she has sponsored for six years to get a “veteran” designation on the driver’s licenses of returning servicemen and women to help in getting jobs and schooling. The bill has passed the Senate and is likely to pass the House as well.

When she began, she received immediate pushback from the secretary of state and mostly disinterest from her colleagues. Over the years, she “went to all of my colleagues, heard their opposition, their reasons. It got to be a joke when I sat down next to someone. There was meeting after meeting in the secretary of state’s office. They now are in favor of it.”

The bill went through many revisions and Althoff said she considered every objection. “It is still conceptually exactly what I wanted, although not starting as quickly, and not with the same administrative structure, but key elements are in there.”

Relationships, Relationships, Relationships

What are the lessons here for back-benchers?

First, empathy is a critical skill for success in this role. That requires listening rather than advocating, deeply understanding others’ points of view, especially when they are different from yours.

Second, be ready to compromise, which requires knowing your non-negotiables and keeping the list as short as possible. Everything else in the bill is simply a resource for building support for the essence of what you are trying to accomplish.

Third, and most important, it is all about relationships. A friend of mine often reminds me, “Relationships are primary. Everything else is secondary.” Relationships can compensate for the absence of formal authority.

As Althoff says, “Everyone wants to be invited to the party.”